



Jackson Purchase Historical
Society

Volume 6 | Number 1

Article 2

6-1978

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Recommended Citation

(1978) "Antietam: Day Of Decision," *Jackson Purchase Historical Society*. Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs/vol6/iss1/2>

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ANTIETAM: DAY OF DECISION

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On August 20, 1977, in company with my daughter Maurelle, her husband Herb L. (Bub) Holt, and my granddaughter Kristen, I had the privilege of touring the twelve square miles of the Antietam Battleground. This Battle of Antietam, known also as the Battle of Sharpsburg, changed the course of the Civil War.

The site of the battlefield lies East of Sharpsburg, Maryland, in Washington County, along State Routes 34 and 65. Both routes intersect U.S. 40 or 40A and Interstate 70. The site includes eight miles of paved tour road and as much walking as one wishes to do. Eight hundred and ten acres of land are included in the Antietam Battlefield site today.

Exhibits and an eighteen minute historical slide program at the Visitor Center give the Battle of Antietam story and prepare the visitor for a better understanding of this "Day of Decision" on September 17, 1862. However, one must follow the outlined tour and stand in each historic place to get the "feeling" of the bloody battle known by the name of a peaceful creek. Antietam Creek flows into the Potomac River not far from the small town of Sharpsburg. On this autumn day in 1977 the water moved quietly southward winding its way to the Potomac, much as it must have done in the fall of 1862.

Today, as in 1862, in this battle site a large field of corn is being readied by nature for harvest. Tall, sturdy stalks fully loaded with ears of corn rise from the fertile Maryland soil. Cornfield Avenue now is peaceful and quiet, the quietness broken only by the voices of tourists, speaking softly and standing reverently in memory of fallen American Soldiers. On September 17, 1862, there were 12,410 Federal troops killed or wounded and 10,700 Confederate casualties as each man fought for a cause in which he believed. The Miller farm and cornfield, the Joseph Poffenberger farm, the Dunker Church, the North, East, and West Woods, the Burnside Bridge, the Roulette, Piper, Mumma and Sherrick farms were places synonymous with death on that day.

The woods are gone today but the Dunker (Dunkard) Church, reconstructed on the original site, stands with open doors saying "Welcome" to the many visitors. One of their members, a young minister, gives the history of the church and an account of the fighting around the building on that fateful September Day.

Today the Sunken Road or "Bloody Lane" is covered with grass. Bloody Lane, the name given because 4,000 lifeless bodies lay near its banks as a result of three hours of pointblank fighting — The Mid-Day Phase of battle — beginning at 9:30 a.m. and ending shortly before 1:00 p.m.

There D. H. Hill's Confederates contested this sunken road or lane formed by long use of animals' feet into a natural trench, bordered by rail fences. The Union Generals were Israel B. Richardson and W. H. French in the sunken road fighting. R. H. Anderson, G. B. Anderson and Rodes reinforced the Confederate position.

Today, as then, Burnside Bridge, sturdy and strong, spans Antietam Creek. This 1836 stone bridge, site of the latest part of the day's fighting, is now a quiet passageway over the flowing water meandering to the Potomac River. These scenes of peace and quiet today were sites of fiercely raging battles on September 17, 1862, as General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia met the Army of the Potomac, under the command of General George B. McClellan.

But we need to think of the "Why and How" of Antietam. Why was Southern General Robert E. Lee in Maryland with his Army of Northern Virginia? The Second Battle of Manassas in August 1862 was a victory for the Confederates. In June General Lee had turned back a Union thrust against Richmond and now seemed a proper time to go Northward. The Federals had been weakened by recent defeats but Gen. Lee had received information that 60,000 replacement troops had been received in Washington and would soon be in the Northern ranks. As the weaker side General Lee felt he could not wait. Then there was a strong feeling that in Maryland there were many secret sympathizers with the South who would welcome Southern troops. So on September 3 the decision was made to enter Maryland. The next day Lee wrote President Jefferson Davis that he would proceed into Maryland unless Mr. Davis disapproved.

On September 5 General Lee crossed the Potomac and moved north to Frederick. The Maryland response was divided. Barbara Frietchie, heroine of Whittier's poem of the same name, is represented as defiantly waving the Stars and Stripes from her window as Stonewall Jackson's men marched through Frederick. Compton's Encyclopedia states that a Mrs. Frietchie (1766-1862) actually lived in Frederick and was outspoken for the Union cause but some of the poem's incidents are imaginary. There were women whose love went to another flag and they would cheer the men in Gray as they marched by. The Gray Uniforms were badly worn and one Southern Sympathizer is supposed to have said with tears in her eyes and her hands raised, "The Lord Bless your dirty ragged souls."

General Lee issued a proclamation to the people of Maryland stating why he had come among them and that he was prepared to assist them. Douglas Southall Freeman in his "History of Robert E. Lee" gives the complete proclamation which closes with these words:

This army will respect your choice, whatever it may be; and while Southern people will rejoice to welcome you to your natural position among them, they will welcome you when you come of your own free will.

West of Frederick was a sixty-five mile barrier called South Mountain, a continuation of the Blue Ridge. There were two main passes through it, Turner's Gap and Crampton's Gap. Gen. Lee planned to take his forces through the gaps which would bring him to the northern end of the Shenandoah Valley. This would be his line of communication as he went north. However, Harper's Ferry was in the valley, held by the Union, and Lee thought he should split his army and take Harper's Ferry. He issued Special Order 191 to this effect but General McClellan was now following Gen. Lee and a lost copy of the Special Order 191 was found by an enlisted man and given to Gen. McClellan. He had Gen. Lee's complete plans and after losing twenty-four hours in deliberating he moved against the passes September 14. Gen. Lee moved rapidly to coordinate his forces; Gen. Longstreet was to return from Hagerstown, D. H. Hill from Boonsboro, and Stonewall Jackson from Harper's Ferry which he had taken on September 13. Gen. Lee was defeated on the 14th at South Mountain and fell back to Sharpsburg, southwest of Boonsboro, and there established his line about three miles along the crest of an elevation.

The Union troops having cleared the gaps of South Mountain on the 14th now marched the eight miles to Antietam Creek and formed in line along the east ridge on the 15th with some 50,000 troops as opposed to Gen. Lee's about 30,000 and the decisive engagement at Antietam was about to begin. Reinforcements for both armies changed these numbers.

This paper will not deal with all the tactical maneuvers of the September 17 fighting. It deals more with the effect on both the North and South. But it is advisable to give a list of Divisions and Commanders which I have compiled from an article by Forrest Morgan of the Connecticut Historical Society found in the Encyclopedia Americana:

UNION ARMY

Right Wing: Joseph Hooker

First Corps: Joseph Hooker

Three Divisions: Abner Doubleday

J. B. Ricketts

G. C. Meade

Center: E. V. Sumner

Second Corps: E. V. Sumner

Three Divisions: I. B. Richardson

John Sedgwick

W. H. French

Twelfth Corps: J. F. K. Mansfield

Two Divisions: A. S. Williams

G. S. Greene

Left Wing: A. E. Burnside

Ninth Corps: J. D. Cox

Four Divisions: O. B. Willcox

S. D. Sturgis

I. P. Rodman

J. D. Cox

(E. P. Scammon in battle)

Reserve:

Fifth Corps: Fitz-John Porter

Two Divisions: George Morell

George Sykes

Sixth Corps: William B. Franklin

Two Divisions: H. W. Slocum

W. F. Smith

Fourth Corps (temporarily attached):

One Division: D. N. Couch

Cavalry: Alfred Pleasonton

CONFEDERATE ARMY

First Corps: James Longstreet

Five Divisions: Lafayette McLaws

R. M. Anderson

D. R. Jones

J. G. Walker

J. B. Hood

Second Corps: T. J. "Stonewall" Jackson

Four Divisions: I. R. Jones

A. R. Lawton

A. P. Hill

D. M. Hill

The battle was in three phases according to the information given by the National Park Service of the U. S. Department of the Interior.

The Morning Phase, 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., centered around the Dunker Church; the Poffenberger farm where Hooker launched the initial attack with 8,000 men and was stopped by Jackson's troops in the Cornfield; East Woods where General Joseph Mansfield was fatally wounded as he led his Twelfth Corps into battle; the Miller cornfield where the most fighting took place as four Union divisions attacked and four Confederate divisions counter-attacked, with the line of battle sweeping back and forth across the field fifteen times; and the West Woods where General John Sedgwick's division lost more than 2,200 men in a thirty minute charge into the woods. Some descriptions of this early fighting said that "The Artillery raked the field with canister until every stalk of corn was cut as closely as could have been done with a knife." A Union General later wrote "The two lines almost cut each other to pieces."

The second period was the Mid-Day Phase in the Sunken Road or Bloody Lane which was mentioned earlier.

The Third Phase of the fighting occurred at Burnside Bridge, named for the Union General whose four divisions were held off most of the day by a few hundred Georgia riflemen. General Burnside failed to capture the bridge until early in the afternoon, then it was another three hours before his troops could advance up the steep slope on the Western side of Antietam Creek. On our tour of the battlefield we stood on the Western Heights looking far down to the bridge spanning the water and wondered whether our energy was sufficient for the walk down and back to the heights. But I knew I had to stand on *that bridge*.

Statistics of the number of men engaged in the battle vary but most estimates say that around 40,000 Confederates withstood 87,000 Union Forces. All that day, September 17, 1862, on east and west sides of Antietam Creek, around a little Dunker church, in a cornfield, through the woods (now gone), in a pasture lane worn by cow paths, and across a stone bridge surged a human tornado. Antietam National Cemetery contains 4,776 Union soldiers at rest. No Confederates are buried there. Their bodies are in Rose Hill Cemetery in Hagerstown, and in Frederick, Maryland, and Elmwood Cemetery in Shepherdstown, now in West Virginia. Carl Sandburg in Volume I, "Abraham Lincoln War Years," quotes Mary B. Mitchell, a volunteer nurse in Shepherdstown, in her graphic description of the wounded as they "poured in on this hot and dusty autumn day."

Antietam-Day of Decision! Twenty-three thousand lives sacrificed and neither side really won the battle! But there were decisive facts, General Robert E. Lee's failure to carry the war effort effectively into the North caused Great Britain to postpone recognition of the Confederate Government. Of equal importance is the fact that it gave President Lincoln the long awaited opportunity to issue the Emancipation Proclamation which he did on September 22.

From a tactical point of view the battle was a draw. At the close of the long day's fighting General Lee was "fought out" yet he was able to pull the remnants of his army together and fall back across the Potomac to friendly Virginia soil. A thumbnail sketch would say of the day that the battle began at dawn on the 17th as Hooker's artillery began a murderous fire on "Stone-wall" Jackson's troops posted in a cornfield north of town. The battle raged southward all day — from the North woods, through the Cornfield, the East Woods, the West Woods, past "Bloody Lane" and Burnside Bridge, to the Hills below Sharpsburg, where at last it ended. The timely arrival of A. P. Hill's division stopped the final assault of Union Forces just short of victory.

Antietam was also decisive because Gen. McClellan lacked the initiative to subdue the Confederate Army and thus end the war. McClellan had won the victory and did not know it. General Longstreet said, "We were so badly crushed at the end of the day that 10,000 fresh troops could have come in and taken Lee's Army and everything he had." McClellan wrote his wife "I feel some little pride in having, with a beaten and demoralized army, defeated Lee so utterly and saved the North so completely." President Lincoln had urged him in an official order to "Destroy the Rebel Army if possible." That was not done. Lee's Army survived the Bloody Day because of the high degree of coordination and cooperation among the Confederate Corps and Division Commanders as opposed to the lack of any supreme will or direction on the part of Union Generals. The day was a strategic defeat for the South for Lee had postpone his invasion of Pennsylvania for nearly a year. Antietam can be remembered as the day that determined both that Lee could not go North through Maryland and that McClellan was unable to destroy the Confederate Army.